

[Ambassador Cathy Russell on #Africa4Her](#)

Cathy Russell serves as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Previously she served at the White House, coordinating the development of the Obama Administration's strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally. Join Ambassador Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) for a Twitter #YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 2nd at 13:30 UTC. Additional details below.

U.S. Ambassador Cathy Russell Amb. 
Russell in a meeting with Wanjira Mathai, the Director, Partnerships for Women's Entrepreneurship in Renewables (wPOWER) at the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Kenya. (State Department Photo)

The United States invests in women and girls for many of the reasons we invest in young African leaders: it's the right thing to do, and it's the smart thing to do.

When policies and programs consider women and girls, they're more successful. They promote stronger democracies and more durable peace agreements. They increase food security and make for healthier families. They improve public service delivery. And they lead to fewer conflicts and more rapidly growing economies.

As the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, it's my job to work with my colleagues across the U.S. government and with leaders around the world to advance the status of women and girls. As President Obama [said in his trip to Kenya and Ethiopia last summer](#), countries won't get ahead unless they include and empower women and girls.

That's why every day I talk with government officials, world leaders, and women and girls about how we can work together to help women and girls achieve their full potential.

In that past year alone, we've made some exciting progress to advance the status of women and girls. Here are just three of the main areas where we're focused on making a difference.

Education

Last March, the President and First Lady announced Let Girls Learn, a U.S. government initiative that addresses a range of challenges that prevent adolescent girls from attending and completing school.

As part of Let Girls Learn, the United States supported a [Women in Science \(WiSci\) camp](#) in Rwanda last summer. For three weeks, 120 girls from nine countries learned valuable skills in science, technology, engineering, art and design, and mathematics (STEAM).

Health and safety

Education is one way to help empower women and girls. But it takes a complete approach to get the job done—one that considers issues like health and safety, in addition to education. That's why the United States is also working with Tanzania and Malawi to support women and girls from several angles.

In addition to focusing on education, our efforts will also tackle gender-based violence and health challenges like HIV/AIDS. Malawi and Tanzania are [DREAMS](#) (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe) countries, which means they are part of a partnership between the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Nike Foundation to tackle HIV/AIDS.

Entrepreneurship

Financial independence can make an incredible difference for women and their communities. Women are more likely to invest their earnings back into their family, paying for things like their kids' education and immunizations. And when they own their own business, women are more likely to hire other women, so empowering women entrepreneurs has a multiplier effect within communities.

That's why we're focused on empowering women entrepreneurs. Over the past year, the United States has opened physical centers that offer resources to women entrepreneurs in Zambia and Kenya. And just last week I joined Kiva to launch the [Women's Entrepreneurship Fund](#), which will expand access to finance for women entrepreneurs in 84 countries.

The fact is that it will take all of us - men and women, boys and girls - to achieve the progress we need to help women and girls achieve their full potential. But if every one of us takes action, we can make real and lasting progress for gender equality.

You can help make this possible. [Take the #Africa4Her pledge](#) and tell us how you will invest in women and girls. Show us how you will raise, educate, protect, support, mentor, and elevate the many women and girls of courage in your life.

[Join the YALICHAT](#) on Wednesday, March 2 at:

12:30-13:30 Cape Verde Time (CVT)

13:30-14:30 UTC/GMT

14:30-15:30 West Africa Time (WAT)

15:30-16:30 Central Africa (CAT) and South Africa Standard Time (SAST)

18:30-19:30 Eastern Africa Time (EAT)

19:30-20:30 Seychelles and Mauritius (SCT/MUT)

What Climate Change Means for African Women



According to the U.N., women in sub-Saharan Africa spend an average of 40 billion hours a year collecting water. (© AP Images)

In Tanzania, because of drought, a girl must walk farther for water than her mother did years before. The extra time means she can't go to school.

In Mozambique, flooding leaves standing water in which mosquitoes breed. A malaria outbreak follows, in a place where the disease had not been seen before. A mother is more vulnerable to the sickness at the same time she must care for her sick family.



Women in Sesheke, Zambia, receive mosquito nets to prevent the spread of malaria. (© AP Images)

These aren't imagined scenarios. They're outcomes of weather patterns associated with climate change. And the U.N. and the World Health Organization say those changes impact women more than men, especially in developing countries.


"The impact of climate change on women is huge," Priscilla Achakpa, executive director of the Women Environmental Programme, told *Vogue Magazine* of her home country of Nigeria. "The men are forced to migrate and they leave the women, who are now the caregivers because they find they cannot leave the children."

Women "are among the most vulnerable to climate change," concludes a U.N. Population Fund report, "partly because in many countries they make up the larger share of the agricultural workforce and partly because they tend to have access to fewer income-earning opportunities."

"In Kenya, where I work," said environmentalist and 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow Asha Shaaban, "women walk up to 10 kilometers in search of water. This is time taken that could be used for other things. They could use that time to take care of children or bring income to the household." When combined with economic and social discrimination, climate change threatens women's rights to education, information, water, food, health care and freedom from violence, says Eleanor Blomstrom of the Women's Environment and Development Organization.

Blomstrom stresses the importance of involving women in the response to climate change — "from the local project level to the international policy level and everywhere in between. "At COP21 in Paris," she said, "the Women and Gender Constituency is showcasing solutions that are sustainable, women-led, safe, promote women's participation and do not increase potential for conflict."


Women's Situation Rooms: Women Protecting Women's Voting Rights

Liberians celebrate the inauguration of 
President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.
Liberia's 2011 election was the first to use a
Women's Situation Room. (©AP Images)

While Nigerians went to the polls in March 2015 for what would prove to be [historic elections](#), 40 young people in Abuja, mostly women, answered phones around the clock, fielding calls about outbreaks of violence and voter suppression.

Meanwhile, 300 female [election monitors](#) observed polls in 10 targeted Nigerian states, reporting irregularities back to Abuja. There, a team of eight eminent women from Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Senegal worked with political parties and religious groups to address threats of violence against women voters and women candidates as they happened.

Welcome to the Women's Situation Room. Nigeria's election was the most recent African election to benefit from a four-year-old idea that's been spreading throughout the continent. Originated during the 2011 presidential and legislative elections in Liberia to promote women's leadership development, the Women's Situation Room model has been replicated in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali and Guinea-Bissau.

Participants in Nigeria's Women's 
Situation Room during the March 2015
elections. (Courtesy U.S. Embassy Nigeria)

Studies show that women and children are the most likely to be affected by election violence, including efforts to prevent women from exercising their right to vote. Women's Situation Rooms employ women and youth to ensure access to the polls.

Among the desks in Nigeria's Women's Situation Room was one staffed with police representatives and another with representatives from Nigeria's Independent Electoral Commission, allowing immediate response to outbreaks of violence and incidents of voter exclusion.

"If a situation happens in the field and we want answers from the police — like violence erupted in a certain state while [women] were taking part in the election — we respond by finding the particular arm of government, INEC or police, to tackle the situation. If they're in the room, it's of course easier and faster," Turrie Akerele Ismael, Nigeria's solicitor-general and one of the situation room's eminent women, reported to U.N. Women.

“Women and youth play an active role in sustaining peace before, during and after the elections,” said Sylvie Ndongmo of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which coordinated the Women’s Situation Room for the Nigerian election. When civic groups work with governmental agencies to reduce threats to voters and candidates, said Ndongmo, “the threat of electoral violence becomes an opportunity for promoting sustainable peace and democracy.”

Youth Will Build Future for Zimbabwe

YALI Network member Charmaine Picardo is a staunch advocate for sexual and reproductive rights. She hopes to establish a think tank in Zimbabwe for youth that addresses topics like women’s rights and civic involvement.

“I want the think tank to be comprised of young people because we are going to inherit the country,” she said.

Selected as a Washington Fellow, the young Zimbabwean wants to learn how she can raise funds to support projects in her areas of interest, which include the rights of homeless women.

Picardo stresses that she doesn’t want to “wait for solutions that come from outside the country or from other people who may not fully be in touch with what is currently going on in Zimbabwe.”

During her fellowship studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Picardo also wants to learn how to effectively combine media and arts with advocacy to push for social change and community development.

“I hope to document young people’s stories, challenges and solutions,” she said. “The media is such a strong communication tool, and now with social media we can reach far and wide.”

Currently a second-year student at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, Picardo became an on-air voice at age 17 on the popular television show *Ndeipi Gen’a*, which focuses on youth activism and development. From 2011 to 2012 she wrote about reproductive rights for the *Herald Cool Lifestyle* newspaper, and in 2012 she worked as a community arts educator for the Arts Lab, a project targeted at youth.

In 2012 and 2013, Picardo was involved in drafting a constitution for Zimbabwe, and in 2013 she served as an election observer.

The youth want to learn “what is happening globally and get a chance to catch up on global trends,” she said.

“We [Washington Fellows] will share and apply the knowledge we will acquire with other people in our countries as well as mentor others and actively participate in various areas to foster

development.”

Photo credit: U.S. Embassy Harare

Generation Good

A generation plans to change the world. Millennials — or 18- to 29-year-old Americans — are anxious to get jobs, but given a choice, they favor jobs they figure might make the world a better place. They grew up in the digital age, making them well aware of the world’s problems.

Today’s university students, especially, have a do-gooder mission, and fulfilling that mission is more important to them than having children or a prestigious career, acquiring wealth or becoming community leaders, according to Cliff Zukin, professor of political science at Rutgers University. Their sensibility is sure to affect how businesses operate because, by 2020, millennials will make up nearly half the workforce.

“My generation has been imbued with a sense of responsibility,” said millennial Allison McGuire of the Companies for Good blog. “We grew up learning that our actions directly affect our communities.” As workers, millennials hope to nudge their employers to take responsibility for employees, for society and for the world, she said.

But millennials are not idealistic fools. According to a 2012 survey conducted by Zukin for Net Impact, an advocacy group, the recession of the late 2000s made the millennial generation care about survival in the labor market more than anything else, including their change-the-world aspirations. Job security and a good work/life balance surpass their altruistic desires.

Still, Zukin argues, that is “quite unusual for those in their early 20s, who are supposed to be so self-confident and entrepreneurial.” As the economy improves, he believes, the younger generation will re-focus on making a difference and seek jobs allowing them to do that.

Photo Credit: Women’s Technology Empowerment Centre/[Flickr](#)
